DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 540 CS 215 542

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TITLE Bringing Them Home: Stretch 101...A Practical Guide to the Long Haul.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; *High Risk Students; Journal Writing; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Assignments; *Writing Laboratories; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Basic Writers

ABSTRACT

Students are advised to enroll in WAC 101--a writing across the curriculum "Stretch" course--based upon SAT scores. Two types of "at risk" English composition students usually comprise a WAC 101 Stretch class. The first type are the familiar students who are underprepared for college writing courses, while the second are students whose "at risk" situation stems more from personal circumstances rather than from their basic skill level. Pacing of this kind of course must include a "gestation period," giving time for students to wrestle with concepts that were never easy for them. Grammar exercises, discussing and working through each essay assignment, narrative skill development through tag-team story-telling/writing exercises, and requiring students to use the university writing center are effective practices. Journaling as well as in-class and out-of-class freewriting also help students compose and organize their sentence-level and global skills. One everyday issue that needs attention is logistics. Requiring that students spend time one-on-one with a trained peer tutor can be crucial to the success of some students. (CR)

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Bringing them home:

Stretch 101 . . . a practical guide to the long haul.

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During the third week of my first semester teaching the Wac 101 "Stretch" course, a colleague asked me how things were going with the class. I replied: "I must be having a good week. Unlike last week, I haven't had to call the ambulance --YET."

Though it may sound as though my expectations became drastically lowered as a result of a student's asthmatic anxiety attack during their first in-class diagnostic essay assignment, the ambulance incident drove home more powerfully than any other experience Just how badly some students need extra time, extra instruction, extra practice in order to reach a writing skill level that will allow them to produce thoughtful and critical written work. The student who panicked was in fact an excellent writer. But she needed time and room to relax in order to compose. The in-class diagnostic had triggered a reaction, mostly due to her own medical condition (of which I was not aware), and to conditions in her life that were situated far from the campus. However the incident became a metaphor to me, and the student herself a symbol of the need I was hired to fill, as a Stretch instructor.

I. Enrollment:

Early on, I realized that Stretch enrollment was an issue. Students are advised to enroll in Wac 101 based upon SAT scores. Though controversy alternately rages and wanes concerning the validity of standardized tests, it was apparent to me that each student in the class, save two or three students, could in one way or another be classified as "at risk." Over time, I

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came to reshape my working definition of the label "at risk student." Approximately half of the class comprised the kind of "at risk" English composition student I had read about and discussed in workshops with colleagues. These were the musicians, engineers, and accountants of tomorrow who simply had never connected well with written composition classes. This was a familiar group to me: I had several years' experience working with students who were underprepared for college writing courses.

The other half were of a different type of "at risk" student. Early on, I realized that an unusually large proportion of the students in my class were phoning in messages, bringing in forms from the Disabled Students Resources, and clinging to me after class. Several of them were obviously reading the assigned materials and writing essays at a level comparable to "A" and "B" students in the regular First Year Composition courses. Their kind of "at risk" situation stemmed more from their personal circumstances than from their basic skill level. One had to keep bailing his brother out of jail. Another, a 17 year-old, was being shuttled from her brother's home to her mother's house, and then back again. A third suffered from adult attention deficit disorder. A fourth was legally blind. Yet another was a Romanian student who had immigrated during high school, and stubbornly refused to consider enrolling in the course designed to teach English for speakers of other languages. And so on. As teachers of composition, we have all learned to deal with the heartache of watching students struggle to stay in school, encouraging their efforts as best we can. But even my three years of teaching the beginning PRE-freshman-comp. English course as an adjunct at the Community College had not prepared me for the number of severely at-risk students in this one classroom.

At first I panicked, reading all I could from the theories of the voodoo gurus of composition theory -- Rose, Emig, Flower and Hayes, Ede, Lunsford, Elbow, Fulwiler, Bartholomae, and so on -- sometimes soberly questioning whether some of them had ever taught at a large state university. There were more than fifteen students in the Stretch class I would have instinctively pegged as probable drop-outs in an average 101 class. And I had to keep them there, keep them surviving for an entire school year!

II. Pacing:

It was obvious that I had to give serious consideration and review to the pacing of my stretch course. About half-way through my first semester teaching Stretch 101, another first-time Stretch teacher remarked to me that she was a little disappointed that her students' essays did not seem to be up to "normal" 101 standards, even though they had had twice as much time to work on them. Granted, she said, they were probably of a higher quality than they would have been on a tighter schedule, but she was wondering if the extra time afforded to them for each essay would really make a difference, after all. I advised her to wait, before passing judgment on the program, and here's why:

Because I had taught freshman composition for eight years, and had also taught the Beginner's English class offered at a local community college, I knew about what some of us called the "gestation period." Although I wholeheartedly believe that students benefit from such approaches as in-class exercises, journal writing, invention heuristics, and even the occasional discussion about grammar and syntax, I have learned to relax and forgive myself when their written work does <u>not</u> at first seem to be the least bit --"encumbered" shall we say?-- by the ideas and information exchanged in my classroom. The less skilled writers in a composition class are

quite often grappling with a subject they don't like, and wrestling within that context with concepts that never were easy for them, concepts which mesh and compound and complicate each other, and sometimes cancel each other out. It takes time for these things to sink in. I expected that some of my Stretch students might even remain "unbloomed" until the second semester. And this was the case with several of them. During periodic meetings of the teachers in the Stretch program, we aired concerns about students who seemed on the borderline of passing/not passing at the end of the first semester. I chose rightly to retain my two borderline students, and while one dropped out for reasons outside of school, the other finally began putting it all together, and managed a decent passing grade, pulled out of trouble mostly by his work during the second semester.

During the first half of the school year, I had my students work on modal paragraphs, and then construct essays employing multiple drafts in the same modes. I spent probably more time on grammar exercises than is advisable, and yet the drills and quizzes helped the students to *focus* on language more closely than many of them perhaps ever had. Having an extra two weeks to discuss and work through each essay assignment, gave me more time to generate class discussion about assigned readings, and to employ activities and assignments based upon critical reading skills. Likewise, the collaborative learning exercises and workshops I set up were varied, and often successful: they were especially enthusiastic about working on narrative skills in the team-tag "It was a dark and stormy night" story-telling/writing exercise. Being able to say at the end of a class period that we could pick up where we left off, and continue a workshop activity that seemed to grow into a larger project was a welcome luxury. During this first

semester I also worked very closely with our Writing Center, requiring students to use the facility at least ten times throughout the semester.

The second semester, several of my stretch students did not make it back to ASU. Greg worked on retention figures, and told me that the students I lost had transferred to other colleges or dropped out for personal reasons, not related to the Stretch course. Nevertheless, I threw out the modal paragraph as a drafting tool, and switched to journaling. The in-class and out-of class directed free-writing had an almost profound effect. I am still not convinced that their early work with sentence-level exercises was a waste of time; but the directed free-writing seemed to be doing more to help them compose and organize their sentence-level and global skills than anything else I had employed. I abandoned all but a few "grammar-breaks" and employed journal-keeping and free-writing more and more. Had I never taught a basic writing course before, it would have seemed to me that certain students who had simply made up their minds they would finish the whole year were now writing better through sheer force of will.

III. A Few Notes on Logistics:

Finally, I had to deal with the everyday issues of logistics. Connecting students up with the Writing Center often means logistical juggling of time and resources. Requiring that students spend time one-on-one with a trained peer tutor or an educational specialist was crucial to the success of several of my students, but I found myself occasionally flogging and nagging them to meet their Writing Center requirement. I have only praise and admiration for the tutors and specialists who worked with my students.

Another logistical consideration was the new (to me) scheduling and planning framework of mapping out a course not for one 16-week semester, but for an *entire* school year. Despite my many warnings that in signing up for Stretch, they were dedicating the particular days/hours of our section for TWO semesters, I did lose one student to scheduling problems. I noted privately to myself at the end of the school year that nine months is a nice length of time to work with a group of writers, but that it is a very long time to deal with exceptionally needy or otherwise problematic students. I was given a departmental teaching award for dealing with one particular young man, whose problems, fortunately, were medicable.

At the beginning of the semester, as the paramedics were rolling my stressed and panicked at-risk student out to the ambulance, I remarked to the campus police officer who had responded to the 911 call, that none of my assignments had ever had that effect on a student before. He looked over his sunglasses at me, grinned, and said. "Yeah . . Right. This is an English class? Well. Just don't do it again."